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ABSTRACT

The three position papers on reading disability and illiteracy offer a description of the present position and boundaries of the problem which the current state of knowledge, research, and experience affords us. The first, "The Costs of Illiteracy" by A. Dale Tussing and Laurence B. DeWitt, attempts to describe these "costs" as the quickest way to demonstrate that this affluent, highly-educated society is confronted with a severe problem; the second, "An Attack of Reading Disability: Some Policy Issues and Suggestions" by Ralph Hambrick, Thomas B. Corcoran, David R. Fendrick, and Gerhard Kutsch, addresses the most obvious location of the problem: the schools. The third paper "Breaking the Cycle of Illiteracy: Focus on Adults" by Michael Marien and Roger DeCrow, suggests that the solutions to a problem depend in good measure on its definition. It questions "If adult illiteracy (parental) is the major factor in the reading disabilities of their children, can we successfully attack either aspect of the problem independent of the other?" The basic conclusions are: policy formulation should precede program development and action, and policy analysis should precede policy formulation. (Author/LS)

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THREE POSITION PAPERS ON READING DISABILITY AND ILLITERACY

Prepared for the

National Reading Planning Group

at

Educational Policy Research Center
Syracuse University Research Corporation

I. THE COSTS OF ILLITERACY

A. Dale Tussing
with
Laurence B. DeWitt

II. AN ATTACK OF READING DISABILITY: SOME POLICY ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

Ralph Hambrick
with
Thomas B. Corcoran
David R. Fendrick
Gerhard Kutsch

III. BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ILLITERACY: FOCUS ON ADULTS

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INTRODUCTION

At the request of the National Reading Planning Group, the Educational Policy Research Center at Syracuse has prepared three position papers on reading disability and illiteracy. There are three general points which may help the reader place these papers in perspective.

I. Sequence and Overview

There is a logical sequence to the papers. The first, on the "Costs of Illiteracy," focuses directly on the complex relationships between illiteracy and its broadly defined economic consequences. It presents a way of understanding these relationships, for which no really satisfactory economic data or simple economic theory is available. A "cost" approach to the consequences of reading disabilities, among youth and adults, is readily familiar to Americans. An attempt to describe these "costs" is the quickest way to demonstrate that this affluent, highly-educated society is confronted with a severe problem.

The second position paper, "An Attack on Reading Disability: Some Policy Issues and Suggestions," addresses the most obvious location of the problem: the schools. Here is the contradiction: a generally remarkable performance of a massive school system in educating tens of millions of children which, nevertheless, does not seem able to bring all children to the point where their reading skills are adequate or acceptable. The conclusion is crucial: there is a set of complex policy issues about education and schooling which must be thought through before new programmatic solutions or infusions of money and resources are tried. The paper begins the discussion about what some of these fundamental policy issues are.

The third position paper, "Breaking the Cycle of Illiteracy: Focus on Adults," deals with still another dimension of the total illiteracy problem in America. The "solutions" to a problem depend in good measure

on its definition. Is it primarily with youth that we should be concerned? What if parental--i.e., adult--illiteracy is a major factor in the reading disabilities of (their) children? Can we successfully attack either aspect of the problem independent of the other? Equally important, is a traditional and narrow definition of literacy--for example, a 5th grade reading achievement--any longer adequate to the demands of a complex, modern, rapidly-changing society? This paper addresses these kinds of policy questions and suggests that a multi-faceted, partnership approach may be necessary.

II. Complexity

While all three papers were reviewed by the entire project team, no attempt was made to eliminate all disagreements in analysis. Thus, the reader is immediately confronted with a serious dilemma: what is the problem, what are the issues, what kinds of solutions might be available or have yet to be invented? That dilemma, revealing the complexity of the problem, has not been manufactured by the EPRC. It exists. Thus, these position papers are just that: an initial description of the present position and boundaries of the problem which the current state of knowledge, research, and experience affords us.

III. Policy Analysis and Action

This last point leads to our basic conclusions: policy formulation should precede program development and action. Policy analysis should precede policy formulation. Policy analysis undertakes two tasks. First, it defines the policy issues by a careful review of available data, the state of knowledge and theory, and disagreements over goals. Second, it identifies policy options for the present and future, and assesses their consequences, both intended and unintended.

It is only then that one directs his attention to solutions, programs, and reforms. If this last implementing stage is reached before we understand

more clearly the problem of reading disability and illiteracy--where do we want to go, what are the constraints as well as the possibilities, where do our alternatives lie--we then make much more likely the consequence that the problem may not be solved, it may be made worse. Inadequate levels of reading skill among some of our youth and functional illiteracy among some of our adults produce consequences too important to the future health of the society to let this happen.

Warren L. Ziegler
EPRC
July 1970

THE COSTS OF ILLITERACY

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THE COSTS OF ILLITERACY

The costs of illiteracy are shared by both the illiterate and the literate. The illiterate person pays in a variety of ways: he is less likely to be a member of the labor force; if he is a member of the labor force, he is less likely to be employed; if he is employed, he is less likely to have a full-time job; and if he is employed, his income is likely to be less than that of a literate person.

All these costs are burdens not only to the illiterate person but to society as a whole. To the extent that lower aggregate income (or Gross National Product) and higher unemployment rates sap the economic strength of the nation, they are costs to the nation. And to the extent that the illiterate person accounts, at least partly because of his weak education, for higher fire, police, welfare, anti-poverty, and other social-service payments, there is a real burden on the whole society. Even apart from these, to the extent that the illiterate person pays little or no taxes to support other public expenditures, from defense to support for the arts, his lack of education costs the literate in tax dollars.

In addition, the illiterate person pays in another way, as a consequence of the phenomenon of "economic alienation." This powerful and important consequence of illiteracy, though not captured by economic indicator data, matches in importance the quantifiable costs.

Economic alienation of the illiterate also, paradoxically, makes the education of the more literate less valuable, as will be discussed later.

It is almost impossible to determine with any certainty the number of illiterates there are in the United States, much less to estimate the economic costs of illiteracy. There is almost no data on the distribution of reading skills in the population. The "illiteracy" and "functional illiteracy" series published by the Census Bureau merely report the numbers who have finished, respectively, "no years" and "fewer than five years"

of schooling. As is well known, it is not only possible but common to complete five years of schooling without adequate reading skills, and totally illiterate high school graduates are not unknown. By the same token, there are undoubtedly those who have little or no schooling who can read quite well.

Moreover, what are seen as adequate reading skills are not static over time, but advance with the general level of education. For example, a recent study done for the Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators indicated that the skills required for reading state drivers' manuals ranged from 7th-8th grades in Tennessee (for a 12-page manual) to Freshman-to-Junior years of college in Alaska (where the manual runs 103 pages).

That the "illiteracy" and "functional illiteracy" series are defective is demonstrated by the fact that, since almost no children escape at least five years of schooling today, both measured illiteracy and functional illiteracy are dying out, though true illiteracy does not seem to be.

The following discussion is based, inevitably, on these faulty series.

The fraction of a group's population which is in the labor force, either employed or seeking work, is its "participation rate." For the whole population 18 and over, the participation rate (March 1967) is 59.9%. But for those with fewer than 5 years of school completed, the "functionally illiterate," the participation rate was only 35.9%. Since many persons over 18 are still in school, and since some of them--over 65--are retired, these figures understate the proportion of participation in the labor force by those of "productive age." But the participation rate for the age group 45-54 is 72.3%; for the functionally illiterate of those ages it is only 63.6%.

Those functionally illiterate who are in the labor force are more

likely to be unemployed than the average American. In March 1967, the unemployment rate of those with no schooling was 8.8%, and those with 1-4 years was 5.1%, as compared with 3.6% for the United States as a whole. And for the U.S.A. as a whole, 75.3% of those employed had full-time jobs, while for those without schooling the figure was 50.4%, and for those with 1-4 years, 56.5%.

All of these, together with a lower average hourly wage, help account for the fact that the functionally illiterate person earns an average of more than $4000 per year less than the literate person; and more than 6 million such persons account for an aggregate annual Personal Income deficit in the United States of $25 billion.

Unfortunately, these costs do not constitute a persuasive or even a very strong economic case for additional schooling for those with the lowest educational attainment, for three reasons.

First, these arguments are one-sided. They indicate the costs of illiteracy without mentioning the probable costs of eliminating it. There is substantial evidence that the school system, as it now operates and as it is now constitued, is so inefficient with respect to the average disadvantaged child that his education costs more than it will add to his earnings. Reference here is to the formal, regular school system as it affects disadvantaged children--not to experimental programs, and not to adult basic education programs.

It is to be emphasized that this evidence does not show that more money spent on education of the illiterate would be wasted. It does strongly suggest, however, that a lot of the money spent on the formal school system has been wasted. Indeed, it may be cheaper to pay the functionally illiterate person an amount equal to the average income differential between him and a person with a high school diploma than it would be to bring his income up to that level through more formal schooling.

Second, a corollary proposition is that a dollar spent on more schooling for the white, middle-class-and-above, suburban child adds more to Gross National Product than a dollar spent on raising the educational attainment of the undereducated rural or urban child; among the less-educated, a dollar spent on further educating a white child yields more added income than that spent on a nonwhite child; and a dollar spent on a male child yields more than that spent on a female.

In short, when educational policy is made with reference to maximizing aggregate income, it is inherently discriminatory, and can aggravate existing disparities.

Third, and perhaps most important, all the social and economic disadvantages that are <u>associated with</u> functional illiteracy may not be <u>caused by</u> it; instead, they may have a common set of causes. For instance, because of the family he is born into, a given person is liable to have a set of values which lead him to want economic success, is liable to have connections which provide him with job information, is liable to have the childhood environment which predisposes for success in school, <u>and</u> is liable to stay in school longer. But the statistical evidence discussed earlier would appear to attribute all his success caused by the accident of his birth to but one of the effects of that cause: years in school. Research has also shown that rural vs. urban, white vs. non-white, and South vs. non-South are all also correlated with both years of schooling and with income, once again magnifying the apparent effects of schooling on income.

Some of the income gap directly resulting from lack of educational attainment may have nothing to do with skill levels, but may instead result from the use of high school diploma as a job-rationing device by employers, where applications exceed openings. It follows from this that some of the apparent costs of illiteracy can be most efficiently reduced by educating employers and personnel people away from such hiring practices.

Preliminary results of research at the Educational Policy Research Center at Syracuse indicate that, holding other influences constant, virtually none of the state-to-state variations in unemployment rates can be attributed to differences either in literacy or functional literacy rates. Other preliminary results indicate that there exists a close relationship between years of school and personal income, but that this relationship weakens to insignificance when such other variables as urbanization, race, region, and the like are also considered. We hasten to add that these results cannot be said to disprove a relationship between functional illiteracy and either unemployment or income; we are confident that such a relationship exists. But illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty are so strongly correlated with one another and with such other variables as quality and density of housing, health, nutrition, and the like, and with circumstances of family and birth, race, and region, that the likelihood of isolating the net effect of lack of schooling is slim. The strong intercorrelations are merely a statistical expression of the familiar "vicious circle" of poverty and ignorance.

And while the probable costs of more regular schooling for those trapped in such a cycle may exceed the probable benefits, assuming nothing else is changed, it does not follow that a policy of simultaneous assault on several or all of these elements will necessarily cost more than it will benefit.

Of course, none of this takes into account any of the "by-product costs" of illiteracy and ignorance, such as added police, fire, welfare and similar public service costs. But like unemployment and poverty, these costs may well be consequences of race and racial discrimination, place of birth, the family in which one is born, etc. Merely increasing the years of schooling of the disadvantaged, or increasing per-pupil expenditures in an otherwise unchanged school system, seems unlikely to lower fire, police, and welfare costs, unless an effort is made in a variety of directions. Advocates of more education for the disadvantaged are, in short, ill-advised to rest their arguments on the relationship

between economic benefits and costs, narrowly considered, of such policies.

There are, nonetheless, powerful economic reasons for added efforts in the direction of educating the less educated, even where no strenuous effort is made on other indicators of disadvantage. These other reasons require, however, an expanded and less quantitative notion of what constitutes an "economic" argument.

ECONOMIC ALIENATION

The literature on the economics of education in the United States pays scant attention to actual illiteracy; more discussion can be found in the literature pertaining to less developed areas. This literature puts greater emphasis on the effects literacy education has upon the economy and the society than it does on its effects on purely economic variables. There is a lesson for the United States in this emphasis.

As in less developed areas, reading can be an integrative influence in American society. Print and other communications media are the main force which brings a single economy and society out of regionally, racially, and otherwise separate groups, with differing experiences and perceptions. Thus, the reasons the less developed countries emphasize reading education are just as valid in our own highly developed society.

But the United States has special problems of its own. The illiterate person in the typical less developed country has no particular difficulty functioning in his society, since literacy is not widespread and is not taken for granted. His illiteracy reduces his productivity, his learning and earning potential, but it does not cut him off from work, or from a sense of community with his culture. This is not so in the United States. The society and economy have adjusted to a standard of education which includes reading competence. The more educated the rest of society becomes, the less able to function are the illiterate in that society. They not only fall behind in a relative sense; they are, in an absolute

sense, made worse off by the general educational progress of the majority.

This inability of the uneducated and illiterate person to function has many facets. Even unskilled jobs require attitudes shared by the educated but not by him; he is bewildered by access codes, area codes, and direct dialing; afraid to fly; distrustful of banks; lost, a few blocks from home; and generally left behind and set adrift by the educational progress of his society. He is, to use the word popular in sociology and psychology, alienated. He may be in our society and our economy, but he cannot become a part of them.

To the uneducated person, this means his income and employment are inadequate measures of his economic disadvantage; besides a lower income, he gets less benefit from each dollar of income he does earn. It also means that the educated get less from each dollar they earn. Further educating the disadvantaged, by permitting society to adjust to an even more widely distributed high standard of educational attainment, will, paradoxically, have the effect of making the education of the educated even more valuable. Just as the person with a telephone in his home or office is benefited by each additional person who gets a telephone, so is each educated person benefited by the acquisition of an education of each theretofore uneducated person.

The educated unconsciously and without malice continue to reconstruct the society and economy for their own convenience, unaware and unconcerned that by so doing they make it still more difficult for the poor and uneducated to function. The uneducated are isolated, estranged, and alienated; and the costs this alienation imposes both on the uneducated and on the society as a whole are among the most serious of the costs of illiteracy.

AN ATTACK ON READING DISABILITY: SOME POLICY ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

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AN ATTACK ON READING DISABILITY: SOME POLICY ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

The American school system has achieved phenomenal success. Almost 80% of each age group graduates from high school. Educational Testing Service studies show a steady increase in achievement scores over the past two decades. Recent surveys show that college faculty and administrators believe that current undergraduates are better educated than their predecessors, despite increases in the percentage of the age groups enrolled.

With such educational advances, why has reading disability become a problem of crisis proportions? Accompanying educational advances there has been a major increase in expectations. Almost all parents expect their children to learn to read so they can be a success in school in order to achieve career and social success. Simultaneously, the level of certified educational achievement required for employment has risen steadily. Minority groups are demanding equal educational achievement (not merely equal opportunity in the old meaning) because without it other things which are valued are denied them. The rate of reading disabilities is still less among the white and wealthy than the black and poor. For this reason, reading disability has become a serious social-political problem.

It should be recognized, however, that even if the goal of 100% literacy were achieved, there would still be unemployment, there would still be people at the top and people at the bottom, and, more than likely, a disproportionate number of persons in minority groups would still be at the bottom. It is important to realize that while there may be a close relationship between reading skill and economic success, a major reading program is no substitute for the more difficult task of solving unequal distribution of economic opportunity based on racial, regional, and class differences.

Why do some children fail to read adequately? Some children learn to read with little difficulty. Others graduate from high school and are still unable to read well. Although more blacks have reading difficulties than whites, reading disabilities occur in every racial and social grouping. Many explanations have been offered by the experts:

(1) Some say its origins lie in the child's social environment. This cultural deprivation thesis currently dominates much educational thought.

(2) Some argue that poor reading and its distribution are a symptom of inherited characteristics, that some individuals and some groups have an inherently inferior capacity to learn such skills. This controversy, over the relative influence of "nature" or "nurture," is unlikely to be resolved in the short-run, however.

(3) Some argue that a major cause of reading disability is dyslexia, a neurological disorder which impairs reading. The extent of this disability is a matter of great controversy.

(4) Some suggest that the electronic media has produced a lack of interest in the printed page, hence an inability to use printed media.

(5) Some hold that the problem is to be found in the institutions responsible for transmitting reading skills--the schools.

Are schools the source of the problem? The first four explanations of reading disability cited above are comforting to educators because they place the source of the problem outside the schools. The schools, therefore, can be considered a victim of forces beyond their control. The fifth position, however, is that the schools are a major part of the problem and that overcoming out-of-school factors is the social responsibility of schools. In this view, reading is now a problem because of

what schools do to children.

Schools, it becomes more and more apparent, place children in such an alien and destructive environment that learning is inhibited. Children quite capable of learning, especially the non-white poor, are stifled, bored, and defeated by their school experience. The misfortune of a bad start remains to haunt a child during his entire school experience, not only because he does not acquire a skill which forms the basis for further progress, but also because he is labeled a "problem" or inadequate and is treated accordingly.

To date, most attempts to solve the reading problem in the schools have pushed even further the tendency to label a child inadequate. The basic approach is to isolate the child as a problem, diagnose him, and move him out of his natural social context for treatment. Even though the teaching techniques may be sophisticated and sound, the acts of isolation, diagnosis, labeling, and separation for treatment are fundamentally destructive of the child's belief in himself and hence his capacity to learn. More intensive efforts to eradicate the reading problem by isolation and treatment are likely to make the problem more rather than less severe. A massive attack on reading disability should carefully avoid further entrenching the current approach which inhibits rather than enhances a child's learning. This may mean <u>not</u> calling reading disability a national "disease" because that label will become transferred from the social problem to the child.

<u>Is earlier schooling an effective approach to the problem</u>? Earlier schooling can help, but it can also make the problem worse by intensifying the fear of failure, the feelings of inadequacy, and the boredom which are at the root of the problem for the child. This is even more likely if earlier schooling is an extension of that which now exists. Reading "standards" will be defined for 3-year olds, many will fall sufficiently below the norm to be considered a problem (it is important to remember that the norm is defined so that a certain proportion always falls beneath

it), and the school as cause of reading problems will be extended.

Furthermore, an extension of schooling downward will not guarantee equality of educational achievement. When schooling is extended, non-poor children tend to benefit more than poor children. Thus the achievement gap between the poor and the well-off will be larger rather than smaller at grade 1 or grade 5 or grade 12. Even programs directed toward disadvantaged children often benefit the advantaged more. Kits designed to supplement Sesame Street are commercially available at $19.95, a financial investment beyond the resources of those whose need is greatest. Evidence to date shows that only a portion of the Title I monies intended for the disadvantaged have reached them; the funds have been almost equally directed to the advantaged. Moreover, programs such as Headstart have an unintended affect of stimulating the development of equal or superior programs among the advantaged.

What are some policy approaches for the schools? Insofar as the reading problem is part of the more general problem of equal educational achievement, any solution must be far more than one of educational methods. The problem is larger than one of simply applying more refined methods of teaching to more children; it is a problem of the entire structure and social context of schooling. The most effective policies for improving reading may be those which pay no particular attention to reading, but which instead attend to the problem of the impersonal, bureaucratic aspects of schooling and to the lack of public accountability by those who operate the system. Thus massive infusions of money into the current system may only exacerbate the problem.

For the schools to be an effective place to learn reading (or anything else), reforms must be made which produce in schools an environment where children want to learn, have fun learning, and are willing to take the risks required. Learning is an extension of the natural curiosity and excitement of children. An effective attack on illiteracy will entail reforms which use rather than destroy this resource. This will be no easy

task. However, several reform movements have been initiated which attempt to do just this. In the "Open Classroom" used in the British Infant schools, reading is learned in the process of doing other things which are interesting and exciting. It may be this kind of reform which will enable American schools to be part of the solution rather than an aggravation and even a cause of the problem. The current effort to implement a similar program in the elementary schools of North Dakota deserves careful scrutiny, since the program is state-wide rather than located only in one or two experimental schools.

Are there other things which can be done? The schools are not the only place for reading to be learned as an extension of a child's curiosity. The suggestions below are illustrative of the out-of-school possibilities available to those engaged in an attack on reading disability.

Television commercials. Since most children spend more hours watching television than in school, this provides a ready-made medium through which children may learn to read. There are opportunities which go far beyond Sesame Street. For instance, legislation which required that public service time for "literacy lessons" (and other educational material) be provided by all networks both during prime time and when children most often watch might be effective. As commercials, and now Sesame Street, have shown, effective "lessons" can be conveyed in 15, 30, 45, or 60 seconds. This approach would additionally reach adult illiterates who--for lack of opportunity or initiative or just plain embarrassment--would not otherwise develop their capacity to read.

Children's Centers. Other alternatives outside the schools have considerable potential. Money which would otherwise go toward more of the same in schools might be used to establish Children's Centers. These, a "radical extension of public libraries," would make available to children everything from gerbils to books to inexpensive movie cameras. Care should be taken in the establishment of such Centers, however, that they

not be identified as schools. They are not responsible for a product, except children's enjoyment. Learning, which could not help but occur, would be a by-product, untested and unmeasured.

Youth as a resource. As either a part of Children's Centers or quite separately, an attack on reading disability could devise a reading program which again does not have explicitly instructional intent. During the summer or after school, teenagers could be hired to read to children. This would provide the teenagers with employment--more useful than some of the make-work jobs now being created--provide them the opportunity to improve their own reading skill, and introduce younger children to the world of the printed page. The basic notion that youth have much to contribute to younger children and that learning results from informal, cooperative activities could also be extended to schools.

These simple suggestions may make significant contributions to a quite complex problem. Any approach or program, however, should be carefully monitored to ensure that unintended negative consequences do not outweigh the intended positive ones. Whatever the approach to reading disability, whether within schools or outside schools or both, the problem requires a fundamental rethinking of the nature of education and learning.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ILLITERACY: FOCUS ON ADULTS

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BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ILLITERACY: FOCUS ON ADULTS

A. Parents and Children: The Basic Partnership

However defined, illiteracy is a critical problem among both adults and children. It is tempting to attack the "cycle of sub-literacy" by a preventive program aimed at the young. Reading disabilities among children attract more attention than adult disabilities, possibly because the "task" of the young is seen as learning.

But such a limited approach may be futile. Recent educational research shows the importance of the parent as a teacher of reading. The parent is also, of course, a prime influence in motivating interest in reading by providing books, encyclopedias, newspapers, and magazines in the home. A reading program for children can be "washed out" in the print-poor home by parents who provide little help or encouragement. Reaching parents first, or the entire family at once, may well result in more lasting progress.

Another reason for reaching adults before children is that a shorter payback period is involved. The newly literate adult can immediately realize social and economic benefits, whereas the effects of literacy in the young may not be socially recognizable for ten or fifteen years. Although it is necessary to consider the literacy that will be required of citizens in the future, that future is being shaped in the present by both the literate and sub-literate.

Further, considering adults before children may help correct the bias that our society shows toward the young. Although the young are harassed and regimented in many respects, they are also provided with a wide range of learning opportunities. After they have had some work or college experience, they are preferred by industry over older workers. Conversely, older workers at all levels of the labor force are becoming obsolete at increasingly earlier ages due to rapid social and technological advances.

This long-term trend to earlier functional obsolescence may not be reversed, but it could be slowed by providing every possible opportunity for self-renewal among adults.

If a priority must be made between adults or children, an emphasis on adults may be the key to breaking the chain of illiteracy, in addition to its more immediate social and economic payoffs.

But perhaps it is unwise to indicate a priority, thus suggesting a limited program that falls short of a full attack on illiteracy. Attention to, and participation by, both adults and children may be the key to a broad partnership that will bring many individuals and organizations together.

B. The Problem of Rising Minimum Standards

Our society is rapidly approaching a new and unprecedented condition, where, in order to function as worker, parent, and citizen, one must increasingly be able to engage in a lifetime of learning and unlearning. We are approaching an age of abundant, conflicting, and changing information. Not only is there an explosion of print, but data banks, video cassettes, and picture-phones may soon become part of our everyday life.

Every society requires a minimum level of competence. In pre-industrial societies, these skills entail hunting, farming, and food preparation. In early industrial societies, printed communications become increasingly important, and the ability to read and write becomes necessary in order to participate in the society. While this minimum still prevails internationally, where nearly half of the world's adult population is illiterate in the most fundamental sense, such a comparison is dangerous, for our own society requires a far higher standard of competence.

The need for a new minimum standard relevant to our society is assumed by the concept "functional literacy." Using readily available data, this has been defined as a 5th grade level of "educational attainment" by the

Bureau of the Census and, more recently, the Office of Education has revised its minimum from a 4th to an 8th grade level.

But these grade level definitions are already obsolete. Even in 1965, one writer declared that the "level of literacy today calls for at least a high school education or its equivalent." By 1970 adult educators were advocating literacy assessments based on skill, rather than years in school, and a writer in the Harvard Educational Review suggested that more than half of the age group 25 and over may be functionally illiterate. A still higher minimum will surely be elaborated in the future, perhaps around the concept of a "total communications literacy" or a "humane literacy."

Any effort to define illiteracy can be based on established definitions of the past, emerging definitions of the present, or probable definitions of the future. A campaign based on obsolete definitions, even if successful, would be overshadowed by the new literacy problems of 1980 and still newer ones in 1990 and 2000. Rolling re-definition must be anticipated, for the task may well have to continue indefinitely.

Social change and new definitions of functional literacy are especially trying to adults, who have grown up in different times, under different standards. Rather than ignoring the difficulties of adult adaptation, and allowing the generations to drift further apart, rising minimum standards require that adults be included in any program.

C. Scope of Present Evaluation and Action

Information collecting in America is oriented to an industrial society, with almost total emphasis on economic data and little assessment of non-economic social indicators such as the ability of our population to handle knowledge. One new source of information will be provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is measuring reading and other skills for four age groups. Unfortunately, the Assessment fails to measure the skills and knowledge of citizens over 35 years old--an age group which will be instrumental in shaping the immediate directions of our society.

Similarly, there is no overview data on participation and outcomes of the multitude of adult education programs that are presently under way outside the traditional system of schooling. These programs are aimed at improving basic skills in adults, and are supported by the USOE, industry, the military, and numerous other federal and community agencies and organizations. Some thirty federal agencies are already involved in basic or remedial education of adults, including the Adult Basic Education programs of the USOE, armed forces programs such as Project 100,000, and pre-vocational education in MDTA, JOBS, Job Corps, and para-professional training programs. There are millions of workers improving their literacy skills through corporate training programs and many others are paying to upgrade their skills in speed reading schools. Many more are being assisted by volunteers in schools, libraries, and other community organizations. These efforts involve much overlap and duplication. A new partnership could provide a sense of common purpose, relating particular goals to a national effort.

D. The Scope of Consequences

There would be numerous economic returns from enhancing literacy. According to one rough estimate by the Office of Education, "using the single criterion of income increase, the potential annual benefits of the Adult Basic Education program are about 4 times the annual costs." But the social impacts of expanded literacy may be of more importance than the purely economic. A few of these are:

-- The Individual. The functional illiterate lacks many skills for participating in the wider society, resulting in alienation, loss of personal control, and paralyzing feelings of inadequacy--resulting in hostility toward authority, dogmatism, and a vicious circle of avoiding learning.

-- The Family. In addition to affecting the literacy of children, a literate parent is also more apt to command respect from his children, to support the values and programs of the school (or intelligently participate in its reform), and to effectively manage the household.

-- Democracy. Literate citizens are a primary defense against demogogery. Furthermore, with the widespread desire for participation, literacy is necessary for entrance to the arena of constructive debate.

-- Law Enforcement. It is commonly held that illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment--lack of access to respectable sources of income--serve to encourage crime. Neglected, however, is that illiteracy encourages victimization. By eradicating the climate that encourages such activities, a campaign for literacy can remove a major impetus for criminal activity.

E. How Large an Effort?

A small partnership, with relatively little fanfare, will probably accomplish little. A somewhat larger program could encounter difficulties similar to the recent "War" on Poverty, which underdefined both the nature of poverty and the efforts necessary to alleviate it. By raising aspirations to a higher level than could be achieved, it led to widespread frustration and disillusionment. In an era of credibility problems, promise must be met by demonstrable performance.

A major thrust appears desirable, not only to reach children through their parents, but to provide every opportunity for parents to keep up with the literacy demands of our complex and changing society. To be most effective, the program would have to be large and well publicized to capture the public imagination. Possibly focusing on our bicentennial in 1976, a massive effort could be initiated to achieve a level of literacy among all citizens such that our national documents may be critically appreciated. This includes both our historical foundations and contemporary documents such as the President's State of the Union message, various Commission reports, and books and newspapers dealing with public affairs at roughly a 12th grade level. All individuals, young and old, would form the target population of the effort. All programs that enhance the ability to read in any respect will be considered, as well as new efforts--perhaps even a Literacy Corps.

There is presently a surplus of 38,000 teachers, and the USOE projects a surplus of 55,000 by 1975. Much of this manpower could be utilized. Additionally, there are many young people seeking constructive pursuits for their energies. Several hundred thousand could be recruited as Literacy Aides, or Volunteers in a Literacy Corps. Still more would be available if a National Service requirement were established in place of the military draft.

Public and private funds now being spend should be identified, with analysis as to the most effective use that could be made of additional funds. Possibly a National Literacy Fund could be initiated, where private donations will be matched by state and federal contributions. Through this vehicle, everyone can potentially participate, either as learner, teacher, or direct benefactor.

Effective use of new media techniques could be designed, such as cable television to enable one or more channels to be devoted entirely to literacy efforts aimed at different ages and skill levels and video cassettes available through libraries or other central locations.

Continuing recognition of participants should be given by national leaders. Exemplary students and teachers from a wide array of programs, exhibiting a wide variety of accomplishments, might be periodically invited to the White House. In this way the public imagination could be sparked, and the impression of literacy as a mundane pursuit could be challenged.

Above all, the new partnership should be held together by data that provides national estimates of potential learners, actual learners, teachers, expenditures, programs, and results. A Literacy Census would provide the foundation for assessing the progress of our society. Perhaps conducted biennially, such a census would provide a framework for coordination, a basis for allocating funds among many viable alternatives, and measures of failure or success in meeting the goals of the entire program.

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